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ABSTRACT

A study examined the idea that linguistic competence and linguistic performance may be initially dependent on a substrate of imagery. The study explored the ways in which four student interviewees' talk indicated the visual processes of thinking. The prompt used was: describe some aspect of daily life at the age of 9 or 10. The study reviewed responses from these students from different cultural backgrounds, who remembered meals but in quite distinct ways. The study finds the syntax of observed events complex. Results indicated that all students used visual language to describe their meals, yet each focus was unique: the French and Sudanese male subjects had socially-oriented viewpoints; the American and Jordanian female subjects focused on the individuals in their families; three students used emotional language; and all four students used language indicative of imagery in memory. (A figure is included.) (CR)

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VISUALIZATION IN NATURAL LANGUAGE: FOUR CASE STUDIES IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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In the fall of 1993, a colleague and I tape-recorded interviews with four college students from different cultural backgrounds: French, Sudanese (both males), and Jordanian and American females. My intent was to describe the ways in which the interviewees' talk indicated visual processes of thinking. To that end, the prompt spoken to the four subjects was: describe some aspect of daily life at the age of nine or ten. We also spontaneously added follow-up questions during the conversations, when we wanted explanations.

In the field of psychology, Paivio asserts that linguistic competence and linguistic performance may be initially dependent upon a substrate of imagery. Through exposure to concrete objects and events, the infant developes a storehouse of images which represent her knowledge of the world. Language then builds upon this foundation and remains interlocked with it. "There is a kind of syntax to the observed events, which becomes incorporated into the representational imagery as well" (20). In this small study, the "syntax of observed events" was indeed complex, differing in each student's memory of childhood routine activities. Each of the four students remembered meals, but in quite distinct ways. The French male student chose to compare his family's dinner routine with the television-viewing habits of other French people. The Sudanese young man saw himself eating with his society of friends/playmates, stressing their opposition to their families and the larger society of the village. The Jordanian young woman's talk of meals emphasized the role of her mother as preparer of those meals, and the influence of her

father's work schedule upon the configuration of people at the table. Lastly, the American young woman recalled daily meals as active, interpersonal, and emotional family experiences.

All the participants used visual language to describe their meals, yet each scene is individualized, focused in these unique ways. The French and Sudanese male students directly incorporated more cultural information in their talk -- the French student by referring to television and French people in general, the Sudanese by discussing the social conventions of the village in the formation of eating groups. These are both socially-oriented viewpoints, yet different by virtue of the size of the group (nation vs. village) and the medium of its influence (TV vs. personal communication). The two female subjects, on the other hand, focused on the individuals in their families, especially parents -- the Jordanian by looking at what her parents did for her, and the American by examining the interpersonal dynamics at the table. Thus the selection of topical focus may indicate some gender differences: culture vs. the individuals in the family.

Three students used emotional language -- the two females and the Sudanese male. The American young woman spoke of crying and fear in response to punishment, and the Sudanese young man and Jordanian young woman spoke of hate, in both cases for the social conventions of their cultures. The latter two saw those cultures as restrictive.

All four students used language indicative of "something like taking oneself in imagination to a thing or things somewhere and somewhen and 'perceiving' it then and when [sic]" (McGilvray,

202). Familiarity with the English language and narrative conventions probably enabled the American student to keep her verbs most consistently in the past tense, while the other three subjects lost that control fairly quickly, slipping into McGilvray's then and there of their childhoods. However, the American young woman indicated her visual thinking, using conditional verbs, and specifics such as "vivid memories," and "my perceptions," and many active verbs.

Paivio states in his discussion of imagery and verbal processes, "what we remember from connected discourse is largely the general idea or meaning (expressed perhaps as imagery)" (456). In this study of four students from different cultural backgrounds, this seems true also for what they remembered from routine childhood experiences, as they generated them into natural language.

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"VISUALIZATION IN NATURAL LANGUAGE: FOUR CASE STUDIES"

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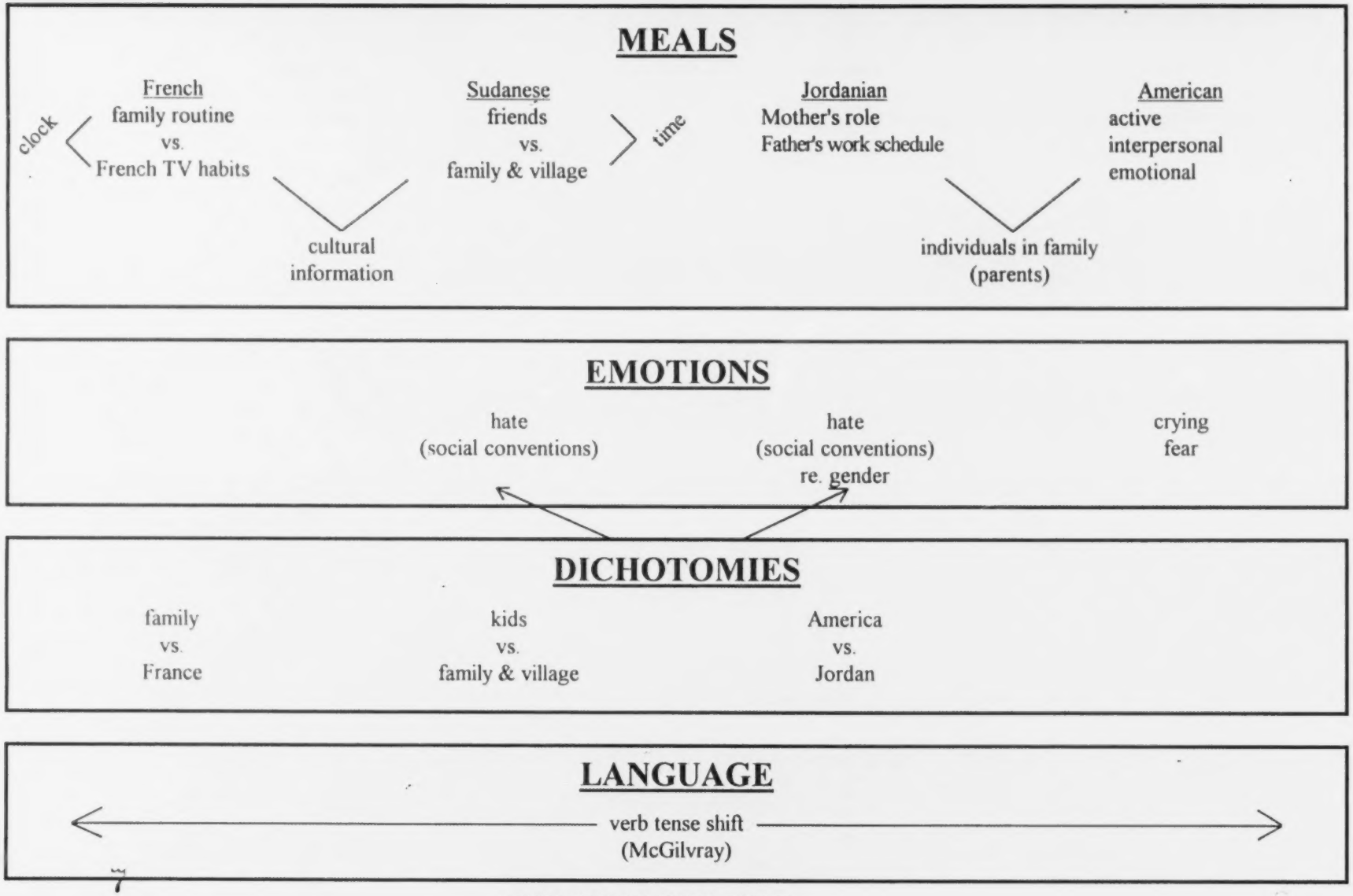

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